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**The Impact of a TRIO Student Support Services Program on Graduation Rates of
Low-Income Students: One Midwestern Institution**

Creative Component Research Project

IGS 599

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Abstract

Low-income students often persist and graduate in postsecondary institutions at lower rates than students from other socioeconomic statuses. The federally funded Student Support Service (SSS) Program exists to improve graduation rates for this population. While there are multiple studies related to low-income status, fewer studies look specifically at SSS. This study examines low-income students, as measured by Pell Grant receipt, and compares SSS and non-SSS graduation rates to determine the impact of this program. While there is no apparent positive impact on GPA or time to degree, SSS does appear to have a positive impact at this institution on the persistence and graduation rates of some student participants. The impact appears stronger for students that are black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino/a. Recommendations for future research and program implementation are offered.

1. Introduction

It has become increasingly important in the United States to have a college degree in order to obtain the type of employment necessary to move toward economic security. Many jobs once obtainable with a high school diploma are now requiring at least some level of advanced education. This requirement is likely to be most problematic for populations that are at greater risk to not begin or complete any postsecondary education. One such population might be students classified as low-income.

Low-income students often have additional risk-factors for non-completion besides those that are financial. They may be the first in their family to go to college, may be older or have other non-traditional student characteristics, may be less academically prepared, may have lower ACT/SAT scores, or may have lower GPA's (Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Low-income students may also have to spend more time working to pay for college while enrolled or have to leave college for periods of time in order to work or for family obligations.

All of these factors indicate a need for student service interventions in order to assist these students in successfully persisting and graduating. A number of interventions with this purpose exist on college campuses across the country. One of these, the TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) Program, specifically targets low-income students, first-generation students, and students with disabilities with the goal of improving retention and graduation rates.

There have been very few studies specifically examining individual TRIO programs. While they are often mentioned in research on student service interventions, they are rarely looked at independently. This study will consider low-income students at one public, four year, research institution in the Midwest, and assess what impact, if any, their TRIO Student Support Services Program has on participant graduation rates. Additional consideration will be given to

the average length of time to obtain a degree, cumulative GPA for the last semester enrolled, and the percentage of students not graduated that continue to persist.

This paper is organized by sections as follows: the first section gives the introduction, the second section provides background on the TRIO SSS program, the third section describes the characteristics of the institution, the fourth section outlines the SSS program at this institution, the fifth section provides an extensive literature review, the sixth section discusses the sample for the study, the seventh is methods, the eighth section presents the results, the ninth section offers discussion, and the final section provides the conclusion.

This study examines the differences between Pell Grant recipients that are SSS participants and those students that do not participate in SSS. Findings include that there appears to be positive impact of the SSS program on some of its participants in terms of retention and graduation rates, when comparing it to the general student body retention and graduation rates. When comparing the SSS to the non-SSS group, non-SSS students had higher graduation rates, although this changes when looking at the groups by the two enrollment years (2001-2002 and 2002-2003), and when examining the graduation rates by ethnicity. When looking at students that have not graduated but are still enrolled at the university, a higher percentage of SSS students are persisting compared to non-SSS students.

2. Federal TRIO Student Support Services Program

The Federal TRIO programs were created out of the 1960's War on Poverty era, and were made up initially of three distinct programs; Upward Bound, Talent Search, and SSS, which was originally entitled Special Services for Disadvantaged Students, but later changed to Student Support Services (Thomas, Vann Farrow, & Martinez, 1998). They are funded Under Title IV of

the Higher Education Act of 1965, and were developed in 1970. They are distributed to colleges and postsecondary institutions through a competitive grant process.

Student service interventions, like the TRIO programs, vary by institution. The federal grant-funded SSS programs, with specific outcome requirements to meet, use a variety of methods and types of services to achieve their goals. In addition to the differing services, the type of institution (public/private, 2-yr/4-yr, research, program of study, etc), admission requirements, region of the country, type of students served, and other aspects add to the complexity of programs. So while evaluating one program limits generalizeability of results across institutions, it seems the most logical way to determine the impact of a program for students at a particular institution.

This study will consider only the SSS program. The SSS Program provides varying levels of student intervention services, such as basic skills instruction, tutoring, assistance in completion of financial aid forms and application, mentoring, grant aid and personal, academic, career, and financial counseling to participants. What services are available through an institution vary based on the grant, which is typically written by the program director for an institution.

To be eligible for an SSS Program at any institution, per the federal grant regulations, students must fall into one of the following three groups:

- Low-income (measured at below 150% of the poverty line),
- First-generation students (with neither parent receiving a bachelors degree),
- Students with a physical disability (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin, 1998).

The stated goals of the program are to increase retention and graduation rates of student participants, to increase transfer rates of eligible students from two year to four year institutions,

and to provide an institutional climate that is supportive of the three groups of students, typically considered to be high-risk for non-completion (Chaney et al, 1998).

In 2001-2002, the Department of Education allocated \$254.9 million for Student Support Services Programs at 944 two and four year institutions. There were approximately 199,956 program participants at an average cost of \$1275 per student. The average program size was 212 students. About one-third of all postsecondary students are at institutions with programs (Zhang, Tsze, Hale, & Kirshstein, 2005).

3. Institution Characteristics

The institution that this study focuses on, Iowa State University, is a public, four-year, land grant research institution with an average undergraduate enrollment for 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 of 23,030 students. Approximately 87.7% of students are white, 56% are male, and 72% are in-state students (Iowa State University website). The institution has seven colleges offering undergraduate degrees, with the largest enrollment in Liberal Arts and Sciences, followed by Engineering and Business. The total cumulative undergraduate GPS was 2.77. The four-year graduation rate was 29.2%, five-year rate was 59.7%, and the six-year rate (the typical measure used) was 65.8%. The average six-year graduation rates by ethnicity are as follows:

- American Indian/Alaskan 53.5%
- Black 40.5%
- White 66.3%
- Asian/Pacific Islander 65.3%
- Hispanic/Latino/a 42% (Iowa State University website)

The community the institution exists within is a small city of 50,000 (including the students, who make up approximately half of this total). It is a metro community in a state with relatively few cities and a very small minority population. The institution employs large numbers

of community members, as well as individuals from surrounding communities; it is the largest employer in the community.

4. Iowa State University SSS Program

There are vast differences across institutions in students served, program funding, and program offerings for SSS programs, as well as the impact that is created by differences in overall institutional type and purpose. At Iowa State University the SSS program has been funded for over fifteen years. The current program size is 250 students, and the current funding for the program grant cycle (four years) is over one million dollars. Current staff consists of a program director, two program coordinator positions that serve as program counselors (with additional duties such as database management, graduate assistant and/or peer mentoring supervision), one administrative support staff, and usually two or three graduate assistants. The program has its own space, which is located on this particular campus in the Student Services Building, a central location. The space consists of staff offices, including space for graduate assistants, a furnished lounge area and counter/cubicle for the administrative staff, meeting rooms, a two-room computer lab with study desks, and other space for amenities such as lockers, printer and supplies, a coffee machine, a microwave and a small refrigerator.

The Iowa State University SSS offers services such as cultural and social events and activities, workshops or other useful information for students, textbook checkout, laptop checkout, and opening and closing ceremonies with recognition given to graduating students and those with high academic achievement. These offerings are funded for SSS participants only.

Students complete applications for participation, with the program replacing about 60 students per year due to graduation or other student participant loss. It serves 250 students each year on a first-come, first-serve basis. Students are often referred to the program through their

involvement in other programs or summer bridge programs on the campus. Often when seeking services in another office familiar with the program and its offerings, students may be referred to SSS. If students are accepted into SSS, they are assigned a program counselor with whom they then meet initially to discuss their academic and personal goals. The counselors and staff track meetings with students, and participation in all SSS services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, participation at events, and other use of SSS services. SSS staff also identifies students that are struggling academically or personally and request meetings to address these issues. Student participants do not always take advantage of the services this program provides, but often, those that need additional assistance will seek out program staff for help.

Something not discussed by staff as a service, but that is evidenced to some degree, is the environment that is provided by SSS to student participants. Some research suggests that a sense of belonging or a sense of community with the institution can aid in the retention of students (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987). This is something that is often difficult to facilitate with larger numbers of students. However, the shared space and the activities seem to at least attempt to build a sense of community for the SSS participants at this institution, and could potentially have a positive influence on their persistence, although this is not considered in this study; it may hold some interesting directions for future research in this area.

5. Literature Review

The literature on low-income students and postsecondary education often focuses on aspects such as access, academic preparation, college readiness, first-generation college student status, remediation in college, and other areas. When persistence and graduation rates are considered for low-income students, they seem to be considered most often in other research as another factor to consider. There was less research specifically on low-income students and

persistence/graduation rates, perhaps because so many factors other than income, or in addition to income (e.g., financial aid, degree plans, ability, intensity and quality of high school curriculum), appear to impact college student persistence and degree completion (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001).

This literature review is organized by topic, with all sections relating to student persistence and graduation rates. The areas that are examined are socioeconomic status, academic performance and preparation, financial aid, gender and race/ethnicity, and finally a review of the literature on the SSS program. Outside of the SSS program, which is the focus of this research, the other areas are explored due to their relationship to the sample in this study, and to their frequent consideration in research as variables that might impact retention and graduation.

5.1 Socioeconomic Status

In all the research examined, low-income students persisted and graduated at lower rates than middle or higher-income students (Thayer, 2000; Muraskin & Lee, 2004; Walpole, 2003; Vargas, 2004; Mortensen, 2001; Choy, 2002; Titus, 2006). This is often true even when controlling for other factors; however, the gap is diminished (Walpole, 2003; Mortensen, 2001; Choy, 2002; Titus, 2006).

Adelman's (1999) frequently cited research used a longitudinal study of what contributes most to degree completion, and suggested the two most important factors were academic preparation and performance and continuous enrollment once in college. This study found that race/ethnicity did not demonstrate any statistical significance. It also determined that socioeconomic status did not make much difference after the first year (Adelman, 1999).

However, a recent study by Titus (2006) used national survey data and found that college completion was positively influenced by SES. This study suggested that students from low SES groups were less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than those from higher SES groups. This finding stood even after taking other variables into account.

Walpole's (2003) study used longitudinal data from the National Study of College Students, part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) sponsored by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), to look at two samples of approximately 2,400 students (2,417 low SES and 2,475 high SES) from 209 four-year institutions. The study was limited to traditional aged students (18-24 years old). Using multivariate analysis she found that low-income students and students of color were less likely than middle/high SES and white students to complete a degree program. Additional findings included lower SES students had lower GPA's, were less involved in clubs and organizations, worked more hours, held lower goals for education, and reported less time studying than higher SES students (Walpole, 2003).

5.2 Grades/Test Scores

A study using a survival model analysis to consider the retention of undergraduate students at a single university in the early to mid-nineties by Murtaugh, Burns, and Schuster (1999) found that students participating in the freshman orientation class graduated at higher rates than those that did not, and that better prepared students (as measured by high school GPA and SAT/ACT scores) also had graduation rates above students less academically prepared or well-performing. They also found that attrition increased with age, and that nonresidents left college at higher rates than did resident and international students (Murtaugh et al, 1999).

Mortensen (1997) found similar results related to academic preparation. Using degree attainment rates from a major study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute of the

University of California at Los Angeles, Mortensen's (1997) analysis found most of the variation in institutional graduation rates to be attributable to the individual characteristics of the students. Those with higher average high school grades and entrance exam scores graduated at higher rates. Mortensen (1997) also found that students from higher income families graduated at higher rates than those from lower income families.

5.3 Financial Aid

In a study of financial aid and its impact on persistence, Braunstein, McGrath, and Pescatrice (2000) found that aid, in all forms, appeared to have no significant impact on freshmen persistence, but that students with higher incomes did persist more frequently than those with lower incomes. This suggests a possibly stronger impact of SES than some of the other studies reviewed. They also found that family income and the educational attainment of parents was important in persistence. Overall their findings indicated that the most important factor for persisting to the second year was academic performance (Braunstein et al, 2000).

Somers (1995) study of 2,100 freshmen at a public university examined the relationship between financial aid and full- versus part-time attendance to persistence from the first to the second semester. With the exception of scholarships, financial aid did not affect persistence significantly. This study did find that socioeconomic status and parental education level were both positively related to persistence in higher education (Somers, 1995).

The sample for this study uses Federal Pell Grant recipients as a measure of low-income status. One study that looked at graduation rates for Pell Grant recipients by Lee (1998) used data from the 1990-1994 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study and found that for students in the lowest income quartile, 55 percent of those with a Pell Grant either graduated or were still enrolled after five years, compared to 41 percent of those without a Pell Grant.

When recipients' rates of persistence were analyzed by income, Lee (1998) found that high-income students have higher rates of completion than students in lower income categories, although the reasons may not be specifically due to financial circumstances. While you must be low-income to receive the Pell Grant, there are often many other circumstances that accompany low-income status, including independent student status, single parenthood, not entering college right out of high school, and other factors (Lee, 1998).

5.4 Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Astin, Korn, and Green (1987), in a longitudinal study based on a survey of 8000 students, followed them from high school to college graduation, looking at retention and the characteristics of students who dropped out. This study identified gender as being related to whether or not a student was retained, with females being retained and graduating at higher rates than males. In a later similar study, Astin (1997) identified four primary variables impacting college retention and graduation; high school grades, ACT/SAT scores, gender and race.

Many studies have identified race/ethnicity as a factor in persistence and graduation rates (Murtaugh et al, 1999; Mortensen, 1997; Walpole, 2003; Astin, 1997; Titus, 2006). A study by Mortensen (1997) found that Asian and white students graduated at higher rates than did black or Hispanic students. Titus (2006) found similar results when comparing college completion rates by race/ethnicity; compared to white students, black and Hispanic students demonstrated lower rates of college completion.

5.5 TRIO Student Support Services Program Literature

Despite its longstanding federal support, which would seem to warrant closer evaluation, there have been few studies specifically examining the federally funded TRIO programs. There have been summaries of the individual program outcomes, as reported to the Department of

Education by program directors. There have also been national reports on the various programs, often commissioned by TRIO or the Department of Education. But research specifically on the SSS program by an entity not directly related to the program in some way is scarce. What follows is a review of some of the literature available that considers the SSS program and various outcomes independently from the other TRIO programs.

Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, and Rak's (1997) research compared the status of nearly 3,000 disadvantaged students participating in SSS since entering college 3 years earlier to the same number of nonparticipating comparable students. They found that the services offered by SSS programs varied among institutions, but shared the same focus: to help disadvantaged students persist and graduate from college. This study suggested that SSS participation did demonstrate a small but positive impact on grades, credits earned and persistence for low-income students. Additionally, they found that the size of this impact was dependent upon the level of student participation in the SSS program. They found the impact to be significant among all subgroups of students.

In a longitudinal study of retention outcomes of the Student Support Services Program, Chaney et al (1998) found that SSS had a positive impact on retention, although findings differed based on which services were used by students and how often. This study also confirmed that SSS affected retention both directly and indirectly through its effect on GPA (Chaney et al, 1998). SSS participants had higher GPA's than the comparison group (non-SSS students with similar characteristics) which has been determined to be an indicator of increased retention in other studies.

In a similarly structured comparison study looking at like groups of SSS students and students from the BPS study (Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study) in 2002 (Zhang et

al, 2005), SSS students demonstrated higher persistence rates to the second year (67% compared to 51%) and third year, although the gap narrowed in the third year.

Research by WESTAT (a contract research organization) following 2,900 SSS students at 30 colleges and universities through their third year of college, suggested that SSS participants persist into the third year of college at a 22 percent higher rate than students with similar backgrounds who do not participate in the program (Council for Opportunity in Education, 2000).

In their literature review, Thomas, Vann Farrow, and Martinez (1998) discuss one study's evaluation of four SSS programs where the graduation rates ranged from 32-63%, depending upon the institution. This inconsistent information might be based on any number of factors, such as different program/service offerings, type of institution, rigor of curriculum, various individual characteristics of students (e.g., academic preparedness, family income, first-generation status), and other factors which may impact retention and graduation rates (Terenzini et al, 2001).

There have been some useful studies that try to control for these factors and other studies that try to use a more broad comparison group. Thomas et al (1998) did look at graduation rates of SSS participants at one institution, but did not consider race or ethnicity, independent or dependent student status, or a specific population of students at their institution for comparison. Instead, they compared to graduation rates of a comparable sample from national graduation rates. Their findings were that SSS students had comparable graduation rates to the national sample, so these students were at least not succeeding at lower rates (Thomas et al, 1998).

Perhaps one drawback of the SSS programs is the rather limited number of students that they are funded to serve. A review of programs, using data from the College Board's National

Survey of Outreach Programs for 1999-2000, which looked at 1100 programs in fifty states addressing the needs of low-income and otherwise disadvantaged students, suggested that few programs exist with a broad enough purpose or funding (Swail, 2000). In citing TRIO programs, the author noted that they are able to serve only about 10% of the students eligible for services.

6. Sample

There may be varying definitions of low-income, so in order to provide a like-comparison group for low-income SSS students, the sample was chosen from Pell Grant students. Pell Grants go to the lowest income students that complete their FAFSA (Federal Application for Student Aid). A brief description of this program follows the data source section below.

6.1 Data Source

For this particular study, there was no single database able to provide all data necessary to obtain GPA, graduation status for SSS and non-SSS Pell Grant students, and total years to degree. Data had to be obtained from the following multiple sources:

(1) Student Support Services Database

All SSS programs are required to keep records on their students and outcome data. This institution created an online database for their records in 2001-02, and so data prior to this date would have had to be collected manually. Additionally, Pell Grant status of students was only added to this database in 2005-2006, so students enrolled in the study years were not identified as Pell. Because SSS status is not identified in either of the other two databases used, student identifiers were collected on all SSS participants for both years (01-02 and 02-03) and all other information was attached to the SSS sample from the other offices by matching identifiers.

Because data was not available for students in the SSS program earlier than 2001-2002 in the electronic database, this was the first year of data able to be obtained for this study. This

impacts the data in that the four year graduation rates were only available for the 2001-2002 year (those for students entering in the 2002-2003 academic year or later were not available). Figure 1 below shows the average entry year of the sample. Four year graduation rates are available only for students entering in the 2001-2002 and prior academic years.

[Figure 1 about here]

(2) The Office of Financial Aid Database

To receive a Pell Grant, students must complete the Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA). This institution maintains a database of all information from the FAFSA in its Office of Financial Aid, and is able to pull data such as family income, family size, total financial aid award, other gift aid or work study award, and Pell Grant amount on individual students. The total Pell Grant sample for both years was pulled and sent on to the Registrar's Office for the remaining data.

(3) The Office of the Registrar

A student records system is maintained by the Office of the Registrar based on information that students provide on their application to the institution. Data from this database is easily matched to other data collected by use of student identification numbers or social security numbers. The data collected from this database includes date of birth, gender, ethnicity, classification, year of enrollment, year of graduation, cumulative GPA at last date enrolled, ACT score (if taken), transfer status, and residence. This office completed the dataset for both years and for the SSS and non-SSS groups, and also generated a random sample of Pell Grant recipients for the study.

6.2 Federal Pell Grant Program

The Federal Pell Grant program was initiated in 1972 as the Basic Educational Opportunity Grants, and today exists as the largest federal grants program. The primary purpose of financial aid programs has always been to assist students with lower financial resources in enrolling in postsecondary education, and to open up their options as far as institutional choice (Muraskin & Lee, 2004). The Pell Grant program is targeted toward lower-income students with this goal in mind, and complements many financial aid packages for students today. In 2000-2001, there was \$7.9 billion dollars for the Pell Grant program, and 3.9 million students aided (Wolanin, 2003). The program provides need-based grants to low-income undergraduates in order to improve access to postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education website).

Eligibility for the Pell Grant is determined through a complex formula that is updated and approved by Congress each year. Factors for determining eligibility include the EFC, or Estimated Family Contribution, which considers the families income, assets, and number of children attending colleges or other institutions of higher education. Other factors include the cost to attend at that particular institution, whether the student will be attending for the full year, and if they will be enrolled full or part time (U.S. Department of Education website).

6.3 Study Sample

There are approximately 5000 students each year that receive Federal Pell Grants at this institution. A random sample of 500 students from both 2001-02 and 2002-03 academic years was pulled to represent the non-SSS Pell Grant recipient group. SSS students do not all receive the Pell Grant, however, data for non-Pell Grant recipient SSS students was not available for examination. The SSS population that received Pell Grants for the 2001-02 and 2002-03 years was identified, and due to small numbers, the total population was used (instead of a random

sample). Since the study is concerned with graduation rates, graduate student data from both groups was removed.

The sample size for non-SSS Pell Grant recipients for 2001-02 was 462 and for 2002-03 it was 471. The sample size for 2001-02 SSS Pell Grant recipients was 124, and for 2002-03 it was 191. Total sample size for both years was 1248 students, with 315 (25.24%) classified as SSS students. Approximately 67.4% of students in the sample were white, 48.8% were female, and 30.6% were of independent student status.

6.4 Study Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. While a single institution's program with its own service provisions and delivery methods is quite difficult to draw valid conclusions from, due to variations in programming and institutional and student characteristics, in a more advanced study, some of these aspects can be controlled for. Future research in this area may want to consider a more complex study design. Further, there are always limitations when a program is based on self-selection. It is possible that the students participating in SSS share some characteristics that make them different than non-SSS participants.

An additional limitation includes the statistical ability of the researcher and the type of analysis used. Only basic descriptive statistical analysis was used for this study, and future studies would benefit from utilizing more advanced methods and data analysis and if possible, identifying a control group for comparison.

Additionally, it would have been very useful to have a population of SSS students that were not Pell Grant recipients and a similar comparison group (low-income, similar characteristics) of students receiving neither the Pell Grant or participating in SSS in order to

truly attempt to discern the relationship between retention and graduation rates and the two programs. Perhaps this can also be attempted in future studies.

One last note related to study limitations; the data used in this study cannot track students that leave this university to transfer to another institution to finish their degree, so there is an assumption in the graduation rates measure that students not graduating at ISU did not obtain any degree or are not persisting at any other institution. It cannot be said with certainty that this is the case. Some admissions offices may be able to track this information based on requests for transcripts or credit information, and this might also be a useful consideration for future research in this and similar areas.

7. Method

This study used basic statistical analysis, comparing a number of factors from both the SSS and the non-SSS Pell Grant recipients. Simple descriptive statistics were run in Excel on family income, loan amounts, Pell Grant amounts, age and GPA. After determining the number of students having taken the ACT and the number of students that graduated, additional analysis was done to determine the averages for these, as well as determining the average year to degree for each group, and again for the ethnic minority populations. SSS and non-SSS populations were also analyzed by independent or dependent student status on the same factors (e.g., family income, GPA, age). In particular, graduation rates, years to graduation and GPA were looked at for both SSS and non-SSS low-income students. Additional consideration was given to independent/dependent student status, persistence rates, and differences by ethnicity as they pertained to persistence and graduation rates.

8. Results

The Student Support Services program is required to set and meet graduation outcome goals each year for continued funding. The program may easily make comparisons to the general student population, as this data is readily accessible and publicized. However, the low-income population looked at is not necessarily characteristic of the general student body.

As this study is considering the graduation rates for this sample, it must be noted that due to the years available for data, while nearly 97% of the sample has been enrolled a sufficient period of time to reach their 4-year graduation date at the time of this study, only 56.17% of the sample has been enrolled long enough to reach the 6-year graduation time-frame.

8.1 Comparisons to Overall Institutional Rates

Overall, the average family income for this sample was lower than the average for the institution (sample avg. was \$25,298), and the average student age was older than the average for the institution (at 23 years old). The average GPA for the sample was 2.64, while the average for the institution was 2.77 (Iowa State University website). About 76% of students in this sample took the ACT, with the average score being 22.85 (out of a possible 34), which is lower than the ISU ACT average at 24.5. The ISU avg. 4-year grad rate for entering freshmen was 29.2%, compared to the sample 4-year rate of 37.1%. The avg. 6-year grad rate for ISU was 65.8% (at ten years, this total was increased to 66.2%), with the sample rate for 6-years being 64.6% (improving to 68.1% at ten years). Table 1 highlights these comparisons.

[Table 1 about here]

When looking at the graduation rates for the SSS and non-SSS Pell Grant recipients, the overall sample rates are 68.11 for SSS and 70.23 for non-SSS, with a significant proportion of the SSS population that had not graduated still enrolled/persisting (33% SSS compared to 20.5% non-SSS). This measure (overall graduation rates for students enrolled in the 2001-02 and 2002-03 years) is not available for the general student body. The average ACT score of SSS is lower (21.29) than both non-SSS (23.04) and the average student score at this institution (24.5). These are shown in Table 2 below.

8.2 Comparisons by SSS and Non-SSS Populations

Setting aside comparisons to the overall student body, this study set out to compare more similar groups by using Pell Grant receipt as an indicator of low-income status. An overall comparison of certain characteristics of the low-income SSS population and the non-SSS population can be seen in Table 2. Overall institutional averages are included where known.

[Table 2 about here]

Comparing the SSS Pell Grant recipients to the non-SSS Pell Grant recipient population, SSS has a lower family income and higher Pell Grant award (as well as overall aid). SSS students are also about a year older than non-SSS students, on average, and have slightly lower GPA's. Fewer SSS students took the ACT, and for those that did, the average score was lower (21.04 for SSS compared to 23.42 for non-SSS students). A higher percentage of non-SSS students are transfer students, and more are classified as in-state students. The overall graduation rate on average for non-SSS students is higher at 70.20% compared to 66.98% for SSS students, and the years-to-degree is slightly less for non-SSS students, as well. When looking at students

who have not graduated but are still enrolled at the university (the measure for persistence in this study), a higher percentage of SSS students are persisting compared to non-SSS students.

8.3 Comparisons of SSS and Non-SSS Populations by Year

When looking at each year separately, findings change somewhat. In 2001-2002, the four- and six-year graduation rates are still lower for SSS Pell Grant recipients than for non-SSS Pell Grant recipients, but the total percent graduated is slightly higher for SSS students, as is the ten-year graduation rate. The year-to-degree measure is also higher for SSS, which along with the higher ten-year graduation rate measure seems to indicate that SSS students, on average, may be taking longer to graduate.

For 2002-2003, the SSS students overall graduation rate is slightly lower than that of the non-SSS students, as are the four-, six-, and ten-year graduation rates. However, the persistence rate is higher (47.89% for SSS and 28.29 for non-SSS) for students not graduated but still enrolled. The average years-to-degree is still somewhat higher for SSS than non-SSS students in this year, as well. This measure might be influenced somewhat by the higher percentage of transfer students for the non-SSS group. More transfer students might translate to fewer years-to-degree, since this analysis considers how long it takes to get the degree from the date of enrollment at this institution.

[Table 3 about here]

8.4 Comparisons by Independent and Dependent Student Status

Independent student status was also considered when looking at the SSS and non-SSS Pell Grant recipient student populations. A larger percentage of SSS students are independent status than non-SSS students (35% of SSS students compared to 29.2% of non-SSS students).

When considering independent or dependent student status as it pertains to the sample, both groups in SSS have lower family incomes, slightly lower GPA's, and lower ACT scores than non-SSS students (see Table 4 below). Independent students, both SSS and non-SSS, have significantly lower numbers taking the ACT than dependent students.

Graduation rates for dependent students in SSS were lowest for all independent/dependent groups, followed by non-SSS dependent students. Independent SSS students took significantly longer to graduate than the dependent SSS or either of the non-SSS groups on average, at 5.52 years; this group was also much older at 29.63 years. Some of the additional time to graduate for this group could be due to work and family obligations of older students.

[Table 4 about here]

8.5 Comparisons by Race and Ethnicity

When considering the data by race and ethnicity for the SSS Pell Grant recipient and non-SSS Pell Grant recipient populations, there are some interesting differences. Family income is lowest for SSS black students, and this group also has the smallest population of in-state students enrolled (less than 50% in-state students for both years). (It should be noted that American Indian/Alaskan natives as an ethnic population was included in the initial data set, but due to an insufficient sample size (N=6), it was considered too small to provide any reliable data.)

For all ethnicities, in 2001-2002, the graduation rates and GPA's were higher for SSS students with the exception of white students. For this year, black and Hispanic/Latino/a SSS students had higher 4-year, 6-year, and 10-year graduation rates than did non-SSS students of the

same race/ethnicity. SSS Asian/Pacific Islander students this year had lower 4-year graduation rates than non-SSS students, but otherwise had higher graduation rates than their non-SSS counterparts.

In 2002-2003, white and Hispanic/Latino/a non-SSS students had higher 4-year, 6-year, and 10-year graduation rates, although white SSS students had a higher overall graduation rate than non-SSS students for this year. For this year, black SSS students continued to have higher graduation rates and GPA's than the non-SSS black students; this is despite lower family incomes and lower ACT scores for both years. Asian/Pacific Islander SSS students also had higher GPA's, higher graduation rates at 4-years, 6-years, and 10-years, and a higher number of students persisting than the non-SSS Asian/Pacific Islander student population. For this year, SSS white students had an overall graduation rate higher than that of their non-SSS counterparts, and their persistence rate was also higher than that of non-SSS students.

Non-SSS Asian/Pacific Islanders had the lowest graduation rates for both the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 sample years. This may be accounted for by considering that 63.3% of this subgroup has enrollment dates of 2001 or later, which might suggest that they had not reached their 6 year graduation term yet. Students typically are taking longer than four years to graduate, due in part to the increasing number of students that must work in order to pay for college (particularly those that are of low-income status). Many institutions now rely on the six year graduation rates. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate the differences by race/ethnicity for the SSS and non-SSS populations by year.

[Table 5.1 and 5.2 about here]

9. Discussion

Many of the studies focusing on SSS in the past often have looked at whether the program is meeting its own goals, compare overall program outcomes to national data on students, or review the services or the literature on the services as an assessment of the program. Other studies attempt comparisons across institutions or for the program as a whole by looking at the outcome data submitted by grantees to the Department of Education (Chaney et al, 1997; Zhang et al, 2005; Council for Opportunity in Education, 2000).

This study alternatively attempted to evaluate a single program by considering one of its federal directives, to increase the graduation rates of its low-income participants, by comparing these students to a similar group of low-income students not receiving SSS services. While the results with this comparison group were not overwhelming, this does not necessarily mean the program is not providing a useful intervention. There are indications in this research that the SSS has a stronger impact on the retention and graduation of minority students. This may be because minority students are often overrepresented in the low SES group and so more frequently qualify for or are referred to services from SSS. It could also be based on the services, although a better structured study would be needed to more completely determine this. Perhaps the intervention students receive through SSS amounts to more than just the services, but also the connection to similar students and to staff with some awareness of the struggles of this population that may further aid these students in their persistence toward graduation. Again, this study was not set up to determine this.

The comparison of SSS to non-SSS Pell Grant recipients showed only slight differences in graduation and retention rates. Rather than interpreting this as SSS not making a significant difference, perhaps Pell Grant recipients are students that have a greater overall awareness of

how to obtain the financial resources and student services through SSS and in other areas on campus. It may be that there are still significant numbers of low-income students that could benefit greatly from the services offered by the TRIO SSS, if only they knew how and where to look.

Ultimately, students in SSS are offered services that if utilized, might provide the additional support needed for those classified as at-risk to be successful. A closer look in the future at the types and amounts of services used by various subgroups of students might provide even greater insight into retention and graduation rates of students in this program. And further consideration of other programs that might be providing similar services on campus for like-populations of students would also be useful.

SSS at Iowa State University seems to be providing services that are aiding some students in their goal to complete college. While the impact on some populations is not conclusive, for low-income students of color – a population that would be considered by most to be at-risk – the program seems to be having some success beyond that of Pell Grant recipients receiving no SSS services at retaining and graduating these students.

10. Conclusion

The increasing cost of education in this country and less federal and state dollars being spent on financing postsecondary education mean that students will carry more of the burden to pay for their degrees. This burden is even more taxing for students that are classified as low-income. Even if they are able to find a way to afford attending a college or university, being low-income often is attached to other factors which further place the student at risk for non-completion. They may require more effective student service interventions than are often available. The Student Support Services Program has been found to have some positive impact

for this population of students. This study suggests that SSS participation at this institution may have some impact on the persistence and graduation rates of its students, particularly for black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino/a students.

With typically the lowest persistence and graduation rates across campus, low-income students seem to be the population most in need of a degree to improve their economic security. Further efforts to study low-income students, the impact of this program and its various service offerings, and the impact of the Pell Grant program at this institution would be recommended. If the findings in this study can be supported in further research, similar student service interventions that could more broadly serve low-income and otherwise at-risk student populations should be considered.

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Appendix

Figure 1
Distribution of Year of Entry

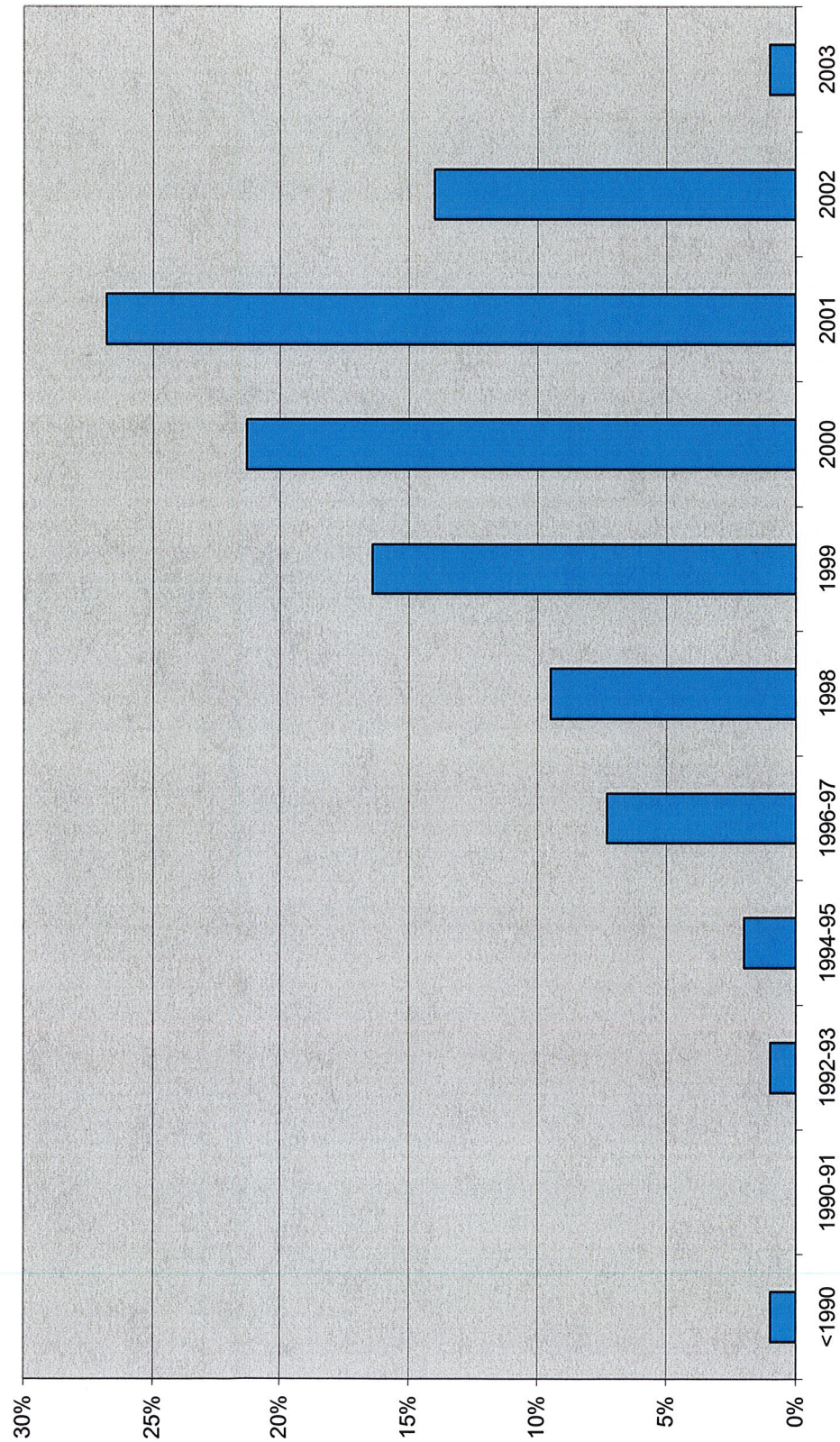


Table 1. ISU and Sample Comparison

| | Sample Averages | ISU Student Body Averages |
|------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Family Income | \$25,298 | \$61,501* |
| Age | 23 | 21 |
| GPA** | 2.64 | 2.77 |
| ACT | 22.85 *** | 24.5 |
| 4 yr. Graduation Rate | 37.1% | 29.2% |
| 6 yr. Graduation Rate | 64.6% | 65.8% |
| 10 yr. Graduation Rate | 68.1% | 66.2% |

* Based on 2001 FAFSA filers (Sullivan, 2003)

**Cumulative GPA from last semester enrolled

*** Based on scores for 76% of sample students that took the ACT

Table 2. Sample Comparison: SSS and non-SSS students to Institution Averages

| | SSS (N= 315) | Non SSS (N=933) | ISU (N= apprx 23,030) |
|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Family Income | \$22,758 | \$26,156 | \$61,501* |
| Std Dev | \$16,817 | \$16,191 | NA |
| Pell | \$2,712 | \$2,371 | NA |
| Std Dev | \$1,179 | \$1,205 | NA |
| Total Aid | \$14,284 | \$10,772 | \$6772 |
| Std Dev | \$6,054 | \$5,168 | NA |
| Age | 24.09 | 22.71 | 21 |
| Std Dev | 6.1 | 3.9 | NA |
| GPA | 2.57 | 2.67 | 2.77 |
| Std Dev | .573 | .727 | NA |
| ACT | 21.04 | 23.42 | 24.5 |
| % Took ACT | 69.84% | 78.24% | NA |
| Transfer | 28.57% | 34.62% | 12.66% |
| Female | 58.41% | 45.55% | 44.35% |
| Race/Ethnicity - White | 29.52% | 80.17% | 87.7% |
| Independent | 34.92% | 29.15% | NA |
| In-State | 70.16% | 87.25% | 76.55%** |
| Total Grad Rate | 66.98% | 70.20% | NA |
| 6 yr Grad Rate | 60.0% | 66.13% | 65.8% |
| Non-Grad; Persist*** | 38.46% (N=104) | 21.22% (N=278) | NA |
| Yrs to Degree | 4.86 (N=211) | 4.31 (N=655) | NA |

*This avg. is for 2001 FAFSA filers; Avg. family income for Pell Recipients was \$28,872

**The Pell Grant recipient status of the sample excludes international and non-citizen students, while the ISU data does not

***As measured by non-graduates still enrolled at time of study (Fall 2006); data not available from ISU for this measure

Table 3. SSS and Non SSS Comparisons by Year**2001-2002 Sample Population by SSSP/Non-SSSP**

| Sample Characteristics | SSSP | Non-SSSP |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|
| % of Sample Population (N=586) | 21.16% | 78.84% |
| N= | 124 | 462 |
| Gender - Female | 59.68% | 47.62% |
| Race/Ethnicity - White | 33.87% | 78.79% |
| Avg Age | 24 | 23 |
| Avg GPA | 2.55 | 2.67 |
| Total % Graduated | 73.39% | 72.51% |
| % Not Grad, still enrolled | 18.18% | 12.70% |
| 4-year Grad Rate | 27.42% | 38.74% |
| 6-year Grad Rate | 64.52% | 68.83% |
| 10-year Grad Rate | 71.77% | 71.43% |
| Avg Yrs to Degree | 5 | 4.34 |
| % Transfer Students | 24.19% | 34.42% |
| % In-State Students | 66.13% | 87.45% |
| % Independent Student Status | 36.29% | 30.74% |
| % w/ACT score | 69.35% | 75.97% |
| Avg ACT | 21.29 | 23.04 |
| Avg Family Income | \$21,872 | \$25,582 |
| Avg Total Financial Aid Award | \$13,756 | \$10,401 |
| Avg Gift Aid (Minus Pell) | \$4,565 | \$2,996 |
| Avg Loan Amount | \$7,016 | \$6,548 |
| Avg Pell Grant | \$2,638 | \$2,311 |

2002-2003 Sample Population by SSSP/Non-SSSP

| Sample Characteristics | SSSP | Non-SSSP |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|
| % of Sample Population (N=662) | 28.85% | 71.15% |
| N= | 191 | 471 |
| Gender - Female | 57.59% | 43.52% |
| Race/Ethnicity - White | 26.70% | 81.53% |
| Avg Age | 24 | 23 |
| Avg GPA | 2.59 | 2.66 |
| Total % Graduated | 62.83% | 67.73% |
| % Not Grad, still enrolled | 47.89% | 28.29% |
| 4-year Grad Rate | 30.89% | 40.55% |
| 6-year Grad Rate | 57.07% | 63.48% |
| 10-year Grad Rate | 60.21% | 67.09% |
| Avg Yrs to Degree | 4.74 | 4.27 |
| % Transfer Students | 31.41% | 34.82% |
| % In-State Students | 72.77% | 87.05% |
| % Independent Student Status | 34.03% | 27.60% |
| % w/ACT score | 70.16% | 80.47% |
| Avg ACT | 20.88 | 23.77 |
| Avg Family Income | \$23,333 | \$26,719 |
| Avg Total Financial Aid Award | \$14,628 | \$11,136 |
| Avg Gift Aid (Minus Pell) | \$4,870 | \$3,476 |
| Avg Loan Amount | \$7,037 | \$6,785 |
| Avg Pell Grant | \$2,760 | \$2,431 |

Table 4. SSS and Non-SSS by Dependent and Independent Student Status

| | SSS Students | | Non-SSS Students | |
|------------------------|--------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|
| | Independent | Dependent | Independent | Dependent |
| | N=110 | N=205 | N=272 | N=661 |
| Family Income | \$9,257 | \$30,002 | \$10,629 | \$32,546 |
| GPA | 2.52 | 2.6 | 2.6 | 2.69 |
| ACT | 19.55 | 22.76 | 23.49 | 23.4 |
| % taking ACT | 42.70% | 79.50% | 59.60% | 85.90% |
| Overall Grad Rate | 70.00% | 65.40% | 71.32% | 69.70% |
| 4-year Grad Rate | 32.73% | 27.80% | 36.40% | 41.15% |
| 6-year Grad Rate | 66.36% | 72.68% | 73.90% | 78.97% |
| Yrs to Degree | 5.52 | 4.47 | 4.85 | 4.08 |
| Not Grad - Persist | 39.40% | 38.00% | 10.30% | 25.50% |
| Gender - Female | 55.50% | 60.00% | 38.60% | 48.40% |
| Race/Ethnicity - White | 42.70% | 22.40% | 80.90% | 79.70% |
| Age | 29.63 | 21.12 | 26.57 | 21.12 |

SSS Independent Students = 35% of the total SSS Sample

Non-SSS Independent Students = 29.2% of the total Non-SSS Sample

Table 5.1 and 5.2 Differences by Race/Ethnicity**Table 5.1 (2001-2002)****2001-2002**

| SSSP | | | | | |
|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|--|
| Ethnicity | Black | White | Asian/Pac | Hispanic | |
| Total Grad Rate | 68.18% | 76.19% | 77.78% | 77.78% | |
| 4-year Grad Rate | 25.00% | 28.57% | 27.78% | 33.93% | |
| 6-year Grad Rate | 61.36% | 61.90% | 72.22% | 72.22% | |
| 10-year Grad Rate | 68.18% | 71.43% | 77.78% | 77.78% | |
| Avg Yrs to Degree | 4.8 | 5.44 | 4.89 | 4.5 | |
| No Grad-Still Enrolled | 7.14% | 10.00% | 100.0% | 50.00% | |
| GPA | 2.43 | 2.58 | 2.7 | 2.61 | |
| Transfer Student | 9.00% | 47.62% | 11.00% | 16.67% | |
| In-State | 29.55% | 95.24% | 77.78% | 72.22% | |
| Age | 23 | 27 | 23 | 23 | |
| ACT* | 20 | 23 | 21 | 22 | |
| Family Income | \$16,935 | \$19,750 | \$25,275 | \$34,846 | |

Non-SSSP

| Ethnicity | Black | White | Asian/Pac | Hispanic | |
|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|--|
| Grad Rate | 60.60% | 76.10% | 50.00% | 57.14% | |
| 4-year Grad Rate | 18.18% | 42.31% | 36.36% | 14.29% | |
| 6-year Grad Rate | 57.58% | 71.98% | 45.45% | 57.14% | |
| 10-year Grad Rate | 60.60% | 74.73% | 50.00% | 57.14% | |
| Avg Yrs to Degree | 4.68 | 4.34 | 3.86 | 4.81 | |
| No Grad-Still Enrolled | 7.69% | 11.63% | 18.18% | 16.67% | |
| GPA | 2.35 | 2.72 | 2.61 | 2.06 | |
| Transfer Student | 18.18% | 35.99% | 31.82% | 7.14% | |
| In-State | 45.45% | 92.31% | 86.36% | 64.29% | |
| Age | 22 | 23 | 22 | 21 | |
| ACT* | 21 | 23 | 20 | 23 | |
| Family Income | \$24,074 | \$25,549 | \$26,540 | \$22,310 | |

*ACT not taken by all; average is for those that took the ACT

Table 5.2 (2002-2003)**2002-2003****SSSP**

| Ethnicity | Black | White | Asian/Pac | Hispanic |
|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Total Grad Rate | 59.72% | 72.55% | 59.46% | 63.64% |
| 4-year Grad Rate | 26.39% | 35.29% | 35.14% | 22.73% |
| 6-year Grad Rate | 55.56% | 60.78% | 56.76% | 59.09% |
| 10-year Grad Rate | 58.33% | 64.71% | 59.46% | 63.64% |
| Avg Yrs to Degree | 4.62 | 5.24 | 4.45 | 4.64 |
| No Grad-Still Enrolled | 37.93% | 35.71% | 46.67% | 75.00% |
| GPA | 2.42 | 2.7 | 2.79 | 2.57 |
| Transfer Student | 22.22% | 54.90% | 16.22% | 9.00% |
| In-State | 40.28% | 96.08% | 91.89% | 86.36% |
| Age | 23 | 27 | 22 | 23 |
| ACT* | 20 | 22 | 21 | 21 |
| Family Income | \$17,019 | \$23,034 | \$32,026 | \$33,685 |

Non-SSSP

| Ethnicity | Black | White | Asian/Pac | Hispanic |
|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Grad Rate | 55.17% | 69.01% | 47.62% | 80.00% |
| 4-year Grad Rate | 24.14% | 41.41% | 33.33% | 40.00% |
| 6-year Grad Rate | 48.28% | 64.58% | 47.62% | 73.33% |
| 10-year Grad Rate | 55.17% | 68.49% | 47.62% | 73.33% |
| Avg Yrs to Degree | 4.69 | 4.28 | 4.15 | 4.75 |
| No Grad-Still Enrolled | 38.46% | 26.89% | 27.27% | 100.0% |
| GPA | 2.34 | 2.69 | 2.59 | 2.66 |
| Transfer Student | 27.59% | 34.11% | 19.05% | 40.00% |
| In-State | 55.17% | 90.89% | 71.43% | 73.33% |
| Age | 23 | 23 | 21 | 23 |
| ACT* | 23 | 24 | 22 | 23 |
| Family Income | \$19,914 | \$27,536 | \$20,329 | \$21,120 |

*ACT not taken by all; average is for those that took the ACT